

SERMON
4th Sunday of Advent

December 23, 2007

Isaiah 7:10-16

Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

Romans 1:1-7

Matthew 1:18-25

Brothers and sisters in Christ, grace to you and peace from God the Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, who is the Christ. Amen.

Henry van Dyke wrote a short story titled *The Other Wise Man*. It was later made into a movie called *The Fourth Wise Man* starring Martin Sheen.

The story tells of a man named Artaban who was to join the other three wise men on their trek to Israel during the reign of King Herod. For he too had seen the bright star that signified the birth of a new king.

So he sold his house and all of his possessions in order to acquire his gift for this child that was destined to be king.

His gift was comprised of three rare gems: a sapphire, a ruby, and a pearl. The agreement that he had with the other three wise men was that when the star they had seen appeared again, he would meet them where they were, and they would journey together to Israel.

Artaban was ten days' journey from his three friends, and they made it clear that they would wait no longer than ten days.

It wasn't too long before the star appeared again. And Artaban set out to meet up with his friends. On the tenth day of his journey, when he was just a few hours from the rendezvous point, he came across an injured man. What should he do? His conscience told him to help the man. But his schedule told him to continue on his journey.

As it happened, the man was an Israelite who told Artaban that a great king of the Jews was to be born in Bethlehem, not Jerusalem. Artaban was trained in the medical field, and felt compelled to stop and care for the man, which then put him behind schedule.

When he finally arrived at the meeting place, he discovered that his friends had already left. Therefore Artaban had to sell the precious sapphire in order to acquire provisions for his own journey to Bethlehem.

When he arrived at Bethlehem, he found no sign of the child or his family. He did come upon a house where a young mother was caring for her small son. She told him that a family such as he sought had been in Bethlehem and that they had attracted a lot of attention.

She went on to say that after being visited by three kings from the east, the family had left. She heard that they had gone to Egypt.

Disappointed, Artaban prepared to leave. But he was stopped by the sound of screaming and crying from the streets of Bethlehem. “They’re killing the children,” came the cries of women. Artaban stood in the doorway of the house as it was approached by a Roman soldier wielding a blood-stained sword.

Artaban reached into the folds of his robe and took out the ruby. He offered it to the soldier and said; “There is no one else in this house.” The soldier took the ruby and went on to the next house.

Artaban then traveled to Egypt in search of the newborn king. There he met a rabbi who told him that the king of the Jews would not be found in the halls of power, but with the poor, the afflicted, and the outcasts.

Artaban began to travel all over Egypt and the rest of the Middle East searching for this new king. One day, he was attacked by robbers who were members of a leper colony.

When they found out that he was a doctor, they brought him back to their colony to help care for them as they suffered with the horrible disease of leprosy. At first it was for a few days, then a few weeks.

Soon, Artaban had been there several years. He then felt that there was no way he could leave those people to suffer alone without medical care. So for thirty-three years Artaban cared for them. He cleaned their lesions, bandaged their limbs, and buried them when they died.

An old man now, and not in very good health himself, Artaban decided to make one more attempt to find this king of the Jews. He traveled to Jerusalem at the time of Passover. Hordes of people were moving together in the same direction. Someone told him that a person who some called the King of the Jews was about to be executed.

Just then, a young woman who was being sold as a slave to satisfy her father’s debts broke free from some soldiers who were holding her. She threw herself at Artaban’s feet. Feeling deeply for her, Artaban used his last gem – the beautiful pearl, to buy her freedom.

Suddenly, a tremendous earthquake struck, and a piece of tile fell from a building, striking Artaban in the head. The young lady whom he had just freed came to him and held his bleeding head. Suddenly she heard something that sounded musical, but almost like a voice. Artaban was speaking.

“Not so, my Lord: For when did I see you hungry and fed you? Or thirsty, and gave you something to drink? When were you a stranger, and I welcomed you? Or naked, and I clothed you? When did I see you sick or in prison and I came to visit you? Thirty-three years I have looked for you, but I have never seen your face or ministered to you in any way my king.”

Then she heard the voice again. Only this time, the words came through loud and clear: “Truly I say to you, inasmuch as you have done it unto one of the least of these by brothers and sisters, you have done it to me.” And Artaban died, having found the King.

I love that story, because it is a true witness to what it means to be part of the Kingdom of God. It is also a good story because it shows how our best-made plans sometimes don’t turn out like we would expect.

Our Gospel story today tells of another man whose plans did not turn out like he had expected. Joseph, we are told, was engaged to a young woman named Mary. But before they came together, she was found to be with child. Now because Joseph was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he thought that he would just end the engagement quietly.

After all, what else could he do? What do you do when all of your plans and dreams are shattered? You pick up the pieces the best you can and you go on – one step after another. One day at a time. You wall away the pain and you go on. But Joseph did something else. He trusted God.

For we are told that while Joseph was considering what he was going to do, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. The angel said; “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

And when Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him, and took Mary as his wife. What on earth was going through Joseph’s mind? What was he feeling? The songwriter/musician Michael Card perhaps gives us a glimpse into Joseph’s mind and heart. Listen to the words of his song titled, *Joseph’s song*.

“Lord, I know He’s not my own.
Not of my flesh, not of my bone.
Still Father, let this baby be
the Son of my love.

Father, show me where I fit
into this plan of Yours.
How can a man be father to the Son of God.

Lord, for all my life
I’ve been a simple carpenter.
How can I raise a King?
How can I raise a King?

O Lord, how can I raise a King? How can I raise a King? But suddenly Joseph understands. He remembers the words of the prophet Isaiah when he declared that a virgin would give birth to a son and he would be called Emmanuel, which means; God is with us.

That is what Joseph held onto. That is the word that gave Joseph the courage to go ahead and take Mary as his wife, and raise the child as his own. It would have been much easier for him to just forget the whole thing, send Mary away, and go on with his life. But Joseph trusted God.

He didn’t know what would happen next, but that’s all part of trusting. Joseph did not know all of the facts. But still, he did not judge Mary. He accepted her even though it would totally altar his life, let alone the embarrassment and even persecution it would cause him.

You see, sometimes God turns our lives upside down for his purposes. Remember the story of Artaban, the other wise man. One day, we can seem to have everything under control, and the next, we can be called in a whole new direction.

There is the story of a soldier that was finally coming home after serving his second deployment in Iraq. When he arrived in San Francisco, he called his parents to let them know that he would soon be home. “Mom and Dad, I’m coming home, but I have a favor to ask. I have a friend I’d like to bring home with me.” “Sure,” they replied, “we would love to meet him.”

“There’s something that you should know, the son continued... “he was hurt pretty badly on patrol one day. He stepped on a land mine and lost an arm and a leg. He has nowhere else to go, and I want him to come and live with us.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, son. Maybe we can help him find somewhere to live.” “No, mom and dad, I want him to live with us.”

“Son,” said the father, “you don’t know what you’re asking. Someone with such a handicap would be a terrible burden on us. We have our own lives to live, and we can’t let something like this interfere with our lives. I think that you should just come home and forget about this guy. He’ll find a way to live on his own.”

At that point, the son hung up the phone. The parents heard nothing more from him until a few days later, when they received a call from the San Francisco police department. Their son had died after falling from a building, they were told. The police believed that it was suicide.

The grief-stricken parents traveled to San Francisco and were taken to the city morgue to identify the body of their son. They recognized him, but to their horror, they also discovered something that they didn’t know. Their son had only one arm and one leg.

I wonder what might have happened if Joseph would have responded like the father in this story.

“Marrying someone who is already pregnant will be a terrible burden. It will cause me great embarrassment. I have my own life to think about. I can’t let this problem of hers interfere with my life.

You see, life doesn’t always happen as WE plan. For I truly believe that sometimes God has even bigger plans for us. We hear the humble words of Mary, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” And later Joseph, humbly obeyed what the Lord had commanded him.

And so, on this last Sunday of Advent, we thank God for the gift of St. Joseph. For his quiet and humble faith. For his readiness to receive God’s word, no matter how much it would upset his life.

As a pastor, I can say that much of my ministry is done during the interruptions of my day, when things don’t go according to plan. Opportunities for ministry sometimes come when we least expect it. Advent calls us to be awake and listen carefully for God’s leading in our lives. In other words, when it comes to God, expect the unexpected.

For who would have thought that God would choose to come to earth in the form of a child born to a virgin in a lowly manger? Who would have thought that God could use people like you and me with all of our failures, hurts, and flaws, to carry on this message of love and hope.

Indeed, the angel proclaimed; God is with us. God is with all of us. Not just Mary, not just Joseph. God is with all of us – with you and with me, in the story of our lives. It is the story of a God who chooses the most unlikely candidates as vessels of His divine will.

Emmanuel, God with us! Let us never forget what that means as we continue on our journey of faith and seek to do God’s will in the world. Amen.

May the peace that passes all understanding be with you now and for life everlasting. Amen.